

[00:00:01.760] - Intro

Welcome to the UK Travel Planning Podcast. Your host is the founder of the UK Travel Planning website, Tracy Collins. In this podcast, Tracy shares destination guides, travel tips, and itinerary ideas, as well as interviews with a variety of guests who share their knowledge and experience of UK travel to help you plan your perfect UK vacation. Join us as we explore the UK from cosmopolitan cities to quaint villages, from historic castles to beautiful islands and from the picturesque countryside to seaside towns.

[00:00:38.200] - Tracy

Hello and welcome to Episode 36 of the UK Travel Planning Podcast. This week's episode is part two of two podcast with special guest Sally-Ann of North Coast Explorers. Part one was released last week, which was podcast episode 35. In that episode, Sally-Ann and I chatted about one of my favourite parts of the world and where Sally-Ann and husband Robert call home, the Far North of Scotland. If you haven't yet listened to that podcast, I would highly recommend doing that now to hear what this spectacular area of Scotland has to offer visitors. In this episode, I chat with Sally-Ann about the advantages of booking with North Coast Explorers, whether for a day tour or multi-day tour of Far North Scotland, what guests can expect from a tour and answers to frequently asked questions. Without further ado, let's catch up with Sally-Ann.

[00:01:29.200] - Sally-Ann

So, yes, I'm Sally-Ann. You might have heard the last podcast, but if not, then let me introduce myself. My husband and Robert, we run a small private tour company up in the far north of Scotland, and we cover the area basically from Inverness North on the mainland of Scotland. So not the islands, just the mainland. And we've been doing that for the last three or four years.

[00:01:59.150] - Tracy

Absolutely. And obviously, if people haven't listened to last week's episode, they need to pop back and listen to it and listen to all about why they need to visit that beautiful part of Scotland. So obviously, your company is called North Coast Explorers. They can find you online and we'll put links in the show notes to your website. So what can people expect if they book with your company? What's special about what you offer?

[00:02:25.980] - Sally-Ann

Right. Oh, that's a million-dollar question, isn't it? Can I just say, a fantastic time! I think that would be great. Absolutely. Well, we really do hope you have a fantastic time. I think most of our guests do. But more than that, I think, first of all, you get peace of mind. If you've listened to the other podcast, what you'll have learned is that the area we cover is quite vast. And I think what I didn't mention last time is a lot of it is actually uncurated. So there aren't a lot of sign posts to some of the really good sites or information boards. There are in certain places, but not everywhere. And so you can miss an awful lot of things. So you get variety in what you see. You get peace of mind in not having to worry about driving the single track roads or where the facilities are or trying to find your hotel, possibly down a single track road or whatever it is, you can sit back, relax, and we'll look after you. And along the way, you'll get what I think is a really good insight, a really good feeling for what the North Highlands is about.

[00:03:47.780] - Sally-Ann

I think the thing is, if you come up under your own steam and just drive around, you can miss an awful lot. And what we always say about having a private tour guide is that you're going to learn and experience so much more. I think we had a guest a couple of years ago, and they had basically toured the route themselves, but they took a day tour with us up in the far north corner. And they said, Oh, my goodness, we have just learned so much today. We wish we could have had you elsewhere on the tour, which was really nice to know. And that sums it up, I think. What you gain from us is the experience. If you just go under your own steam, it will be possibly just a drive. You might just see some of the key sites. But with us, you'll get a really good feeling for the history of the area, but also current affairs. We have a lot of conversations with people about the current affairs of Scotland and the culture of people in the far north. So, yeah, it's a very rounded experience.

[00:05:03.280] - Tracy

It's definitely a way to go deeper and experience a place more, isn't it? When you have the opportunity.

[00:05:11.360] - Sally-Ann

To go with it. Yeah, absolutely. I've also listened to some of the podcasts and I've listened to Victoria and John, which is great, fabulous to hear other people passionate about their areas. And I think we all say the same thing. And we're the people with our feet on the ground. And we really do know the secret places to go, the people to see, and how to get the best out of the area. I think that's it, really. And for us, especially up here, because the area is so vast and there are so many open spaces, it would be easy to miss a lot of things. And I think we're quite personable, too.

[00:05:54.430] - Tracy

Yes, definitely. I'm looking forward to meeting Robert as well, actually, I have to say. Do you both go out on the tours together or does Robert do the tours and how does it work?

[00:06:04.420] - Sally-Ann

Yeah. So we're a husband and wife partnership, Robert and myself. I have to say you're listening to my dulcet tones now, but it's actually my husband, Robert, that does the guided tours and the driving. He is fantastic. I'm not biased, I promise. He's really interesting. I mean, he's very entertaining, he's very considerate, he's incredibly knowledgeable. I can't tell you how much he reads and researches and just loves what he does. So Robert does the actual guiding. So when you're out on tour, you'll be with him and he'll look after you. In terms of a lot of the other parts of the business and the contact you'll have, it would be with me. So I run, I suppose, the admin side and deal with the initial inquiries. And I sort out the toing and froing, really, and all the details to do with the tour. So we're very much a team, I think, and that seems to work well.

[00:07:07.940] - Tracy

And do the podcast, of course, Sally-Ann.

[00:07:09.860] - Sally-Ann

Well, yeah, yes, the marketing side of it and the chitchat. I can talk as well as my husband, so it's fine. The nice thing actually, and it happened several times last year is if the tour comes to the far north east area, the area we know as Caithness, then I do try and go out and meet the guests and spend a few hours with you as well. And most people appreciate that because they've dealt with me via email or over the phone. So that's really good as well.

[00:07:39.690] - Tracy

That's nice to put a face to the voice. It's always good.

[00:07:43.660] - Sally-Ann

Absolutely.

[00:07:44.750] - Tracy

So would you like to talk us through some of the tours that you have?

[00:07:47.720] - Sally-Ann

The way we work is we don't market and sell standard tours as such. We really want to make the tour work for the guest, for you. So the way we do it is most of our tours are multiple day tours, anything really from four days up. We do do some single day tours. So we'll do a single day tour of Caithness. That's the area in the very far north east. Or there's a single day tour that we can do inland a bit, which works really well for people that are doing a tour but want a completely different day. So we'll do that. But most are multiple day tours. And so the way it works, if somebody inquires, sometimes they know exactly how much time they've got for that tour. Sometimes they don't actually. And so a conversation really helps. But they might come and say, we've got five, six, seven days. We'd like to do a tour. What can we do? We've got some tours on our website. We've given them names. A grand explorer tour and a history tour and one thing and another. But the idea really is to give people an idea of what can be done during those time frames and the routes that can be covered.

[00:09:15.170] - Sally-Ann

When someone inquires, if you know how long you've got, great. But what we like to do is try and have a conversation with you if possible. We know it's not always possible because of time differences, etc., and we're happy to deal over email as well. But our preference is to have a conversation and really talk to you and understand what are the things that get you excited about or that interest you. Some people are really interested in history. We had a lady from the US last year who we called, she won't mind me saying this, our Castle Lady. She loved castles. So we created a seven-day itinerary and made sure that we got as many opportunities to see castles as possible. For some people, it's wildlife or just the scenery. And of course, for a lot of people who don't really have anything specific to say, they just say, well, no, we want a good overall view of what the area has to offer. But once we've got all that information, we can discuss with them the route and we can put an itinerary together. So that's our starting point - to understand what people would like from their tour.

[00:10:29.060] - Sally-Ann

The other important thing for us to understand, and this is quite relevant up here, is we do ask people about mobility because our tours aren't standard. And it's not that we do big hikes up mountains or anything. That's not really what we're about. But clearly it's really important to people. For some, it doesn't matter at all, and for some, it really does matter. But it doesn't matter to us because we can make the tour work. So if people are not so mobile, then we'll pull back on the walks and we make sure we have lots of sites and views. And the other thing we have as well, which is actually useful for everybody is we've got a thing called the Sky Explorer. And Tracy, if you get up here, you're going to have to see it because people love it. It's actually a drone with some goggles and so weather permitting, of course. But if the weather is okay, we can send the drone up and then you can look through the goggles and you can see the view of the drone. And this is a fantastic way to see some of the sites from a different perspective or potentially to see a site that you can't actually get to very well.

[00:11:47.980] - Sally-Ann

And people love it. They absolutely love it. So yeah, that's great too.

[00:11:52.860] - Tracy

Yeah, definitely. You know what? I'll be up there. You do realise that, don't you? You keep seeing all this. I'm like, Yes, okay, I'll be getting the Caledonian Sleeper up to Inverness. I was going to also ask this, think of a few questions. It's like a maximum group size that you take. And obviously, you don't mix groups. It's a private group. And just also about ages. I guess those three things would be good to cover.

[00:12:14.320] - Sally-Ann

Yeah, they're all really important. I realised that when you're listening to this, they are exactly the questions you have. Let me start by talking about number of people. We use a luxury 4x4 as transport. So our recommendation is that we prefer not to have more than four people on a multiple day tour. That means that everybody's got plenty of space, there's space for luggage, and it basically makes everybody comfortable. So that could be a group of four people that know each other, maybe two couples traveling together, or say a family. I'll come back to that in a moment. But we also do tours for single people, quite a lot of single people we've had, and including single ladies who love it, or just a couple who are traveling or special occasion or whatever. So up to four people. We can do five on a single day tour, but really, we prefer not to on a multiple day tour because it just makes it far too cramped. So yes. So that's the number of people. In terms of ages, this is important for us. We don't take children younger than 15 on our tours. And that is basically for health and safety reasons.

[00:13:30.850] - Sally-Ann

Because a lot of the places we go are uncurated, we do do health and safety risks on everything that we do and everywhere we go but there are some things for which we just feel it's not suitable. So for us, then yeah, people have to be 15 or over in terms of age.

[00:13:51.030] - Tracy

Okay, yeah, that's good to know. So if people want to book a tour with you, obviously, I'm going to link your website in the show notes so people can get in touch with you. But if you just want to quickly go through that, I think that would be useful. Sally-Ann?

[00:14:02.990] - Sally-Ann

Yes, the website is the best way to do it, to be honest. We've got a Contact Us page on there and there's an inquiry form that you just fill in and it lands in our email inbox. It's also got our email address on there and also our phone number. So we take inquiries or questions in any way you want. We are on social media, so we do have Facebook and Instagram. But yeah, in terms of direct contact via the website is probably the best place.

[00:14:33.570] - Tracy

Okay, that's great. I'm happy to link to that as well. And if people could mention that they heard about you via the podcast or the Facebook group or on the website, that'd be also great, awesome for us as well.

[00:14:45.250] - Sally-Ann

Yeah, absolutely. We love to hear how people find us. So no, it's really important for us to quite.

[00:14:52.300] - Tracy

Absolutely. So obviously, we talked about where you pick people up for the tour. So do you drop them off at the same place? That's all. Yeah. Or can you drop them off at different place if they wanted to, or do they generally want to be dropped off at the same place?

[00:15:03.740] - Sally-Ann

Yeah, we can and we do drop people off at different places. If their onward travel plans dictate that, then yes, we can be flexible. Absolutely. And we work to what makes sense for everybody concerned. We try and be flexible and we try and be as helpful as we can be. So yes, it's just that I think most people tend to use Inverness as a hub and that tends to work to be honest, but we have dropped people slightly further south. Yeah, it just depends. And regarding accommodation, which I think is quite an important thing to mention, we're a very small company, so we're not an agent as such. We're not just a tour company, but we are a tour company. So the way we work with accommodation is we don't book the accommodation for our guests. We recognize that that is required, however. And the way we do it is when an itinerary has been agreed, more or less, so we know where the overnight stopping points are, we will provide you with a pre qualified short list of possible places to stay in that immediate area. I do all that work. I've got a big database of information to do with accommodation across the North Highlands, and we want to make it as easy as possible for guests.

[00:16:32.430] - Sally-Ann

We know this is quite a big deal. It's like, where do you start and how do you know what works and what's reasonable? So we try and do all the hard work without actually booking the accommodation. So we'll provide that to you with as much information as we can. If you're able to provide us an idea of budget and any special requirements that you've got, we'll do as much of that work as we can, and then we pass that on to you to book directly. But in terms of a tour day, we'll obviously pick you up from wherever you're staying and then we'll drop you off at the end of the day. And we also make sure that if you're staying somewhere that maybe is not providing an evening meal, maybe a very good bed and breakfast, then I will have made sure that we have accounted for where you might eat in the evening. All these things we know is really important. And actually, despite the fact that we are a tourist area, there are lots and lots of places to either eat or stay. So all these things are really, really important. And we try and make sure we do as much of the hard work as possible.

[00:17:43.710] - Tracy

Absolutely. It's good to have those things sorted. Just one question before I ask you the very last question, Sally-Ann, is for those day tours that you do, whereabouts do you pick up for those day tours? Because obviously that's quite important. Do you go as far down as Inverness to pick up for those tours or not?

[00:18:01.510] - Sally-Ann

No, we don't. The day tours, I think if you're interested in a day tour, for sure, let us know. But the reality is we've got a couple of day tours that are actually on our website. You can find them on the Our Tours page. And one of them, as I said, covers Caithness. So if you're staying in the Caithness area, we'll pick up from anywhere on that route or close to it. If you want to do the inland tour, then we would pick up, again, somewhere on that route. You might be somewhere slightly further down the East Coast, or you might be staying at the hotel that's in the middle of the country. You might have decided to take the train up. I think I mentioned this maybe in the last podcast. If you decide to take the train up, you can take the train up to a very tiny stop called Kinbrace. You'll think you're in the middle of nowhere. And I know that the owners from the Garvaul Hotel will come and pick you up. And then if you want to do a day tour from the Garvaul, then we would do that too.

[00:19:08.080] - Sally-Ann

So yeah, there's a couple of places. But if you've got questions, the best thing just to do is.

[00:19:12.440] - Tracy

To ask us. Okay, that's fantastic. So it's been brilliant talking to you for this episode and obviously last week's episode. I really wanted to ask you, because I ask this to every guest I have on the podcast and obviously I didn't ask it in last week's episode, but I'm going to ask you today is, what would be your tip that you give to give to anybody who's planning a trip to visit far North Scotland for the very first time?

[00:19:35.580] - Sally-Ann

Yes. Gosh, this is such an important question, isn't it? And one we could probably do a whole podcast on actually. But to give you your answer, I think it is something we've touched on previously, and it's to give yourself time. Really don't try and do too much unless you've got the opportunity to return. Really do. You want to be able to experience the area to really go home and think, Yeah, that was worthwhile. So really, it's just about thinking about how long you've got to give. And obviously, if you can incorporate a private tour into that time and really make the most of it, then I think you won't go home disappointed, for sure.

[00:20:22.160] - Tracy

Absolutely. That's brilliant. Thank you so much, Sally-Ann, for coming in for this episode and last week's episode. And I know that we're going to be doing some more episodes because you're just talking about more tips for visiting far North Scotland, and there's far more we can talk about for that beautiful part of the world. That's for sure.

[00:20:39.370] - Sally-Ann

Absolutely.

[00:20:40.320] - Tracy

Yeah. So thanks so much.

[00:20:41.450] - Sally-Ann

I look forward to it. It's really exciting and we look forward to speaking to you again soon, I hope.

[00:20:48.290] - Tracy

Well, you definitely will. Thanks so much, Sally. Thanks again to Sally-Ann for coming on the podcast to talk about far North Scotland and North Coast Explorers. Links to book a tour with Robert and Sally and can be found in the show notes for this episode at uktravelplanning.com/episode-36. I highly recommend getting in touch with them and booking a tour. Far North Scotland is like nowhere I have been to on Earth. It's an incredibly special part of the world and is somewhere you will never forget. Me? I'm off to book my berth on the Caledonian Sleeper and a room at the Garvaul. Until next week, happy UK travel planning!